

The Marginalized Character, Xiao Wu in Jia Zhangke's Film

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Abstract

Jia Zhangke is famous for the film Xiao Wu. During the course of the movie, everyone tries to adapt to modern society except Xiao Wu, who cannot let go of his old value system and embrace the new one, thus gradually being marginalized by his boyhood friend, his lover and his family. And the profusion of local languages can be regarded as a symbol of Xiao Wu's marginalization.

Keywords

Jia Zhangke; Film; Local language; The marginalized.

1. Introduction

As a pioneer of the Sixth-Generation director, Jia Zhangke shows a keen concern for marginalized figures in China. The protagonists he usually presents are laid-off workers, migrant peasants, prostitutes, criminals, homosexuals, illegal mineworkers, and monks who are marginalized from mainstream society, in which Putonghua Mandarin dominates. A central theme in his narrative cinema has been the socioeconomic upheavals that have accompanied the sweeping reforms since the late 1970s, and the struggles they imposed upon the country's huge marginalized population, especially the rural and the migrant working classes.

2. Theoretical Basis

Marginalization refers to the social disadvantage and relegation to the fringe of society. It is a multidimensional process of social rupture, which detaches groups and individuals from social relations and institutions and prevents them from full participation in the normatively prescribed activities of the society in which they live.

Subaltern theory may serve as another helpful tool in the exploration of the common feature of silent protagonists and their sparse dialogues. Ranajit Guha explains that subalterns are non-elite groups, the people of inferior rank in a society, "whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way." Gayatri Spivak's seminal article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" asserts that in the context of post-colonial production, the subaltern cannot speak. The subaltern may make an attempt at self-representation yet fail to achieve the dialogic level of utterance between speaker and listener. She notes elsewhere that "subaltern consciousness is subject to the cathexis of the elite, that it is never fully recoverable, that it is always askew from its received signifiers, indeed that it is effaced even as it is disclosed, that it is irreducibly discursive" [1]. Under the guidance of the subaltern theory, it can be inferred that Xiaowu is exactly such a figure that is marginalized by the mainstream society in Jia's film.

3. Xiaowu—Marginalized By His Boyhood Friend, His Lover, and His Family

Xiao Wu is the name of the protagonist, a pickpocket from a county village who survives on the fringe of law in the small town of Fenyang. In the beginning, Xiaowu and Xiaoyong are both

rascals and boyhood friends, but Xiaoyong later becomes a successful businessman and community leader. The local television promotes the Public Security and Justice Department's campaign, urges the general public to view common street criminals such as Xiaowu as simply no good, and advocates tough new penalties against them. Meanwhile, Xiaoyong's wedding is publicized on the television station, and Xiaoyong refuses to accept Xiaowu's wedding gift because of their socioeconomic differences. To further the contrast, Jia shows that the station honors Xiaoyong's wedding by playing the love song "Heart's Rain" ("Xin Yu"), which cynically equates mutual affection and love with economic success. The businessman is marrying both a woman and the official ideology of economic progress by any means necessary. Juxtaposing Xiaoyong and Xiaowu, Jia highlights the rising class polarities, with the former representing the newly ascendant and affluent middle class, and the latter symbolizing the more socioeconomically static and marginalized population.

Having failed to maintain his fraternal bond with Xiaoyong, Xiaowu develops a relationship with Meimei, a prostitute who sings at a karaoke bar probably run by Xiaoyong. When Meimei becomes sick one day, Xiaowu takes good care of her. In return, she sings for him Faye Wong's popular love song "The Sky" ("Tian kong"), and the relationship that is first sustained by money develops into mutual trust and affection, or so it seems. Previously unwilling, Xiaowu now sings along with Meimei at the karaoke bar, and plans to give her an engagement ring. But eventually Meimei chooses a rich man over Xiaowu. The song ends up as a poor substitute leaving Xiaowu, now once again the isolated pickpocket unprepared for the new reform-era China, with just the empty promise of romance.

After his disappointments with Xiaoyong and Meimei, Xiaowu returns to his family's home in the countryside. But even here he remains an outsider, as his brother is also getting married. After some arguments with his parents over Meimei's engagement ring, Xiaowu's parents eventually denounce Xiaowu as a rebellious son. Xiaowu is excluded from the hetero-normative narrative of love and marriage that sustains not only the family but also the official nationalist ideology of socialist modernization. He struggles in a rapidly changing society, but cannot quite fit in. Indeed, the character Xiaowu, with his shabby appearance and general weakness, is hardly a heroic or authoritarian figure. In the end, Xiaowu is arrested by the police because of his unlawful acts and endures further humiliation and social subordination, excluded from brotherly, romantic and familial love by the ideologies and practices of the market economy.

4. Local Language—The Symbol of Xiaowu's Marginalization

One of the distinctive characteristics of Jia's films is his consistent and pervasive use of local languages, or fangyan, a striking deviation from the Putonghua Mandarin-dominant soundtrack. Just as Liu [2] puts it that local languages provide unexpected, unpredictable information beyond the redundancy of formal education in schools, the institutions where standard Mandarin is generally acquired. No single, national language can capture the complexity, richness, and liveliness of China's diverse and distinct local cultures as embodied in their local languages.

As the most influential Chinese independent film, *Xiao Wu* provides an excellent text to further examine the function of local language in relation to soundtrack and narrative structure. As Wang Zhuoyi [3] incisively points out, "the key dramatic conflicts in *Xiao Wu*, with social change as its central theme, unfold not in a diachronic dimension but rather in a synchronic space, where aural effects are more prominent than visuality." Jia also believes that the soundtrack should have a structure that is integrated within the film narrative. Indeed, "the film successfully sets up an opposition, defined by the soundtrack, between a relatively quiet, private, intimate space—where the protagonist, a pickpocket, and his "crew" pursue their traditional occupation, following the ethical code of an agrarian society—and a heteroglossic,

public space occupied by broadcasting propaganda as well as entertainment programs of the modern media.” [3] The conflict between the two spaces is highlighted when a TV reporter stops Xiao Wu’s wandering fellow, San Tu, in the street to ask him—in Fenyang-accented Putonghua—questions about the ongoing countywide “strike hard” (yanda) campaign against petty crime.

According to Liu [2], “the microphone held by the reporter is always situated at the center of the image sequence. As a tool for recording and amplifying sound, the microphone seems to become something connecting the private and the public space. However, the public audio space is so privileged and selective that those who fail to express a conforming opinion are rejected. Metaphorically, the microphone as well as the Putonghua it transmits symbolizes a threatening intrusion to people like Xiaowu, who have to remain concealed and speechless in the public space.” However, as the story develops, Xiaowu’s “sworn brothers,” first Xiaoyong, and later San Tu, appear talking on television; this shift from the private space to the public space signifies their gradual accommodation and surrender to the dominant system. In one scene, Xiao Yong, Xiao Wu’s former best friend and partner-in-crime, who is now a prominent local businessman, is granted a public speech in a television report that announces his wedding and hails him as a “model entrepreneur”, so designated by the authorities.

A close reading of Xiao Wu reveals that the local language is so pervasively used in both public and private spaces that its potential subversiveness is hard to pin down. Hao urges Xiaowu to reform, following Xiaoyong’s example. During the course of the movie, everyone tries to adapt to modern society except Xiaowu, who cannot let go of his old value system and embrace the new. Kin-Yan Szeto [3] points out that “the marginalization of Xiaowu parallels the fate of the small county in which he loiters. Although Fenyang used to be the hub of Shanxi draft banks (piaohao), a national financial center in late imperial China, it has been left behind in the reform era. Xiaowu’s actual Henan Anyang Mandarin, which is often unintelligible to the Fenyang people, has already excluded him from the local speech community, evoking an aesthetic effect of alienation for the local Fenyang audience.” On the other hand, Wang’s difficulty in understanding other actor’s Fenyang Mandarin makes an interesting parallel with Xiao Wu’s bewilderment over his surroundings in the film. To a large degree, the local language in Jia’s films is associated with the marginal who are not well absorbed into mainstream society.

5. Conclusion

Xiaowu is the representative of every ordinary individual in the social transformation. Through the relationship between Xiaowu and the surroundings, Jia Zhangke expresses his anxiety about the times, his concern and sympathy for the ordinary life in the tide of the times. At the same time, Jia Zhangke’s favor for the local language represents his concern for the marginalized. He tries to retain the memory of that era through local language to resist the invasion of the mainstream ideology on people’s spiritual life. What’s more, Xiao Wu also expresses Jia Zhangke’s reflection on the current social system. Indeed, it is not the fault of individuals but the whole society that should be responsible for Xiaowu’s tragedy. Our social system lacks attention to the weak and the marginalized. Jia Zhangke may hope to awaken the society’s love for people like Xiaowu.

References

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